

Interview with José da Silva Lopes: an assessment of Portugal's membership of the European Communities (Lisbon, 23 October 2007)

Source: Interview de José da Silva Lopes / JOSÉ DA SILVA LOPES, Miriam Mateus, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Lisbonne: CVCE [Prod.], 23.10.2007. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:04:54, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_jose_da_silva_lopes_an_assessment_of_portugal_s_membership_of_the_european_communities_lisbon_23_october_2007-en-33364629-0e22-4607-b680-af51224b88c2.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Miriam Mateus] In 1986, when Portugal joined the European Communities, what in general do you think were the most striking advantages and disadvantages for the country?

[José da Silva Lopes] Well, that had already started before, not at that time. The problem began ... I mean, Portugal is too small to exist without being a part of Europe. And what's more, for a country in Europe — and a small country, to boot — existing without having privileged relations with an integrated block isn't viable. I know that some countries — I don't know, Serbia maybe — still exist like that, but they're probably in a much worse situation than they might be if they were integrated. And Portugal couldn't ... I mean, it's not enough to know what happened, you have to imagine what would have happened if we weren't in the European Community. If we weren't in the European Community, we'd be in a much worse position.

So we've made some progress in the European Community, or rather, with European integration — it wasn't only the European Community, it was EFTA before that. We've progressed a little though ... when we joined the European Union in 1986, our GDP was roughly 58 % of the European average, then it reached almost 70 % — these figures aren't too reliable, to be honest, they were published by the European Union, and I have to say they should be treated with caution — but we reached 74 % of the European average and now we're at 65 %, because we've been going backwards recently. I admit that something's not right here ... But one thing is certain: despite everything, despite losing ground in the last six or seven years, we're better off than we were in relative terms.

I can't imagine Portugal existing outside Europe, it's impossible. We could still have experienced more difficult times than we've experienced recently, I admit that could have happened, but I don't think we could exist outside Europe, it's not possible.

[Miriam Mateus] In 1986 you were a member of the national parliament. What was the attitude or the reaction of the political parties towards Portugal joining the Communities?

[José da Silva Lopes] Well, when I became a Member of Parliament, the Accession Treaty had already been signed. As was obvious at the time, the only party that was clearly against accession was the Communist Party. As we know, the most enthusiastic party was the PS [Socialist Party]. The other two, the PSD [Social Democratic Party] and the CDS [Social Democratic Centre] eventually fell into line. I think that there was a time when the PSD was a little hesitant — although this might be a slightly personal and unfair interpretation ... well, not hesitant, but at least not showing the same enthusiasm. I think the CDS was always very enthusiastic at that time, at least when Freitas do Amaral and Lucas Pires were around, but after those two, it changed. Those two were both convinced Europeans.

[Miriam Mateus] And more personally, how did you experience that historic moment? What is your appraisal?

[José da Silva Lopes] Well, I wasn't involved. When Portugal acceded, I was no longer involved in government matters, I was just an independent economist. At a certain point — though it was a very short period — I became Chairman of the European Integration Committee, but it was when I was at the Bank of Portugal. I thought I couldn't do both, so I gave it up.

I think that the people in the Portuguese Delegation did a good job, yes, the Portuguese Delegation did a good job. Since I'm very pro-European, my criticism of Europe is not for what it does, it's for what it doesn't do. It's not because it does too much, but because it could do much more, in my opinion. I always thought that it was positive, and we have to acknowledge that, in that respect, Mário Soares ... a short while ago I talked about Correia de Oliveira, but I have to put Mário Soares on the same level.

[Miriam Mateus] And what is your appraisal of the impact of accession on the country's internal structures?

[José da Silva Lopes] I think that it's quite positive, because it's forced us to introduce economic policy measures that we wouldn't have introduced on our own. I don't mean that I agree with everything that's decided in Brussels, Brussels also does a lot of things which I think are misguided, but it does less than we're capable of when we're left to our own devices. So it's good that Brussels sometimes imposes a bit of order on us. We have an environmental policy, for example — I have to say I'm very critical of Brussels environmental policy, but I want a Brussels environmental policy more than I want an environmental policy run by us. But that's just an example.

Brussels agriculture policy is a disaster, it's probably one of the most negative aspects in the European Union. I don't know what ours would be like without Brussels, but it's a disaster. What I don't understand is why Portugal goes to Brussels and defends agricultural policy as it is. In my opinion, we should be on the side of the British — I'm with the British on this — we should be on the side of the British, vigorously attacking agricultural policy, but we aren't, and, in my opinion, that's against Portuguese interests, but ...